BOOM! STUDIOS™

JAMES TYNION IV

WERTHER DELL'EDERA

MIQUEL MUERTO

Nº 20

SOMETHING is KILLING the CHILDREN™

I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER I CAN KEEP DOING THIS.

C'MON, JESSIE...

NO, I'M BEING SERIOUS.

YOU'RE NOT IN THE FIELD. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE...

THESE KIDS, THEY'VE WATCHED THEIR FRIENDS GET KILLED AND EATEN BY SOMETHING UNTHINKABLE.

THEY SEE ME SHOW UP AND THEY THINK THEY'VE BEEN SAVED.

THE LOOK IN THEIR EYES, THAT'S WHAT KILLS ME EVERY TIME.

AND THE WAY IT CHANGES WHEN THEY REALIZE...

JESSIE, DON'T.

I'M SORRY. I DRANK TOO MUCH TOO QUICK. I CAN GET MY HEAD ON STRAIGHT...

HEY. COME HERE.

YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT THE KID. ME TOO.

I KNOW.

THIS IS HOW IT WORKS. AND HELL, WE'RE MORE EFFICIENT THAN WE USED TO BE. YOU EVER THINK OF HOW ***GODAWFUL*** IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IN THE OLD DAYS?

LESS PEOPLE, THOUGH. LESS OF A CHANCE OF A STORY SPREADING.

OKAY, FAIR.

IT'S JUST DIFFERENT OUT THERE, GARY. DOING THE WORK. IT JUST IS.

I'M NOT GOING TO FIGHT YOU ON THAT, KID.

BUT I HAVE TO TAKE THE DOGS AROUND AFTER EVERY BIG HUNT AND PULL ***CHILDREN'S BODIES*** OUT OF THE WOODS AROUND HERE AND ***BURN THEM*** IN A BIG FUCKING PYRE.

KIDS I'VE SEEN EVERY YEAR SINCE THEY WERE SMALL ENOUGH FOR ME TO PICK UP AND PUT ON MY SHOULDERS.

I FEEL YOU, LADY. IT SUCKS.

REALLY, YOU TWO? IT'S THE MIDDLE OF THE AFTERNOON.

HEEEEEEEY.

I JUST WANTED TO BE HERE WHEN THINGS WENT SIDEWAYS.

THANK YOU.

DON'T DO THIS AGAIN. THERE IS A REASON THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY ARE. AND YOU HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES TO TEND TO.

OH, FUCK.

HI.

SHIT, I'M DRUNK.

IT'S OKAY.

NO. I'M SUPPOSED TO HAVE MY SHIT TOGETHER IN FRONT OF YOU.

IT'S NOT LIKE IT'S THE FIRST TIME.

AND...HEY... I DON'T WANT HIM SEEING... WHEN THIS IS OVER...

WE'LL CLEAN UP. I DON'T WANT HIM TO SEE WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN ONE OF THESE GOES THE WRONG WAY.

YOU'RE SAYING THAT LIKE IT'S A ***SURE THING.*** LIKE SHE'S ***ALREADY DEAD.***

FUCK.

HEY, WE ALL HOPE THE KID MAKES HER WAY THROUGH IT. BUT THE DECK IS STACKED AGAINST HER.

THESE DAYS, WE PICK KIDS WE THINK ARE MOST LIKELY TO SURVIVE THE INITIATION.

THE SCARLET MASKS HAVE A WHOLE ***SELECTION PROCESS*** THEY'VE CRAFTED OVER DECADES, SORTING THROUGH THE AMERICAN ADOPTION SYSTEM.

LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT KINDS OF PERSONALITIES.

FOR PEOPLE LIKE ***ME.***

BINGO.

THEN WE BIND YOUNG MONSTERS TO THEIR TOTEMS, MONSTERS WHO HAVE NEVER FED BEFORE. THEY'RE VICIOUS LITTLE FUCKS, BUT THEY CAN BE SUBDUED.

INITIATION IS ALL ABOUT CREATING A ***SYMBIOSIS*** BETWEEN A MONSTER AND AN INITIATE. BONDING THEIR SOULS, FORCING THEM TO WORK TOGETHER.

IT'S HARDER TO BUILD ANY KIND OF CONNECTION WITH A CREATURE THAT KILLED PEOPLE YOU LOVE IN FRONT OF YOU. AND THAT GIVES THE MONSTER THE ***ADVANTAGE...***

AND WHAT IT WANTS MORE THAN ANYTHING IS TO FEED.

BUT IN THE OLD DAYS, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE IT IS WITH ERICA, RIGHT? IT WOULD HAVE BEEN YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ***SURVIVED*** AN ATTACK, BROUGHT INTO THE ORDER.

FORCED TO TAME THE MONSTER THAT KILLED THEIR PEOPLE.

YES, BUT THAT PROCESS LEFT MOST INITIATES DEAD. THAT'S WHY THE ORDER REFINED IT.

BUT NOT SO MANY DEAD THAT THE ORDER DIED OUT, RIGHT?

AARON, HYPOTHETICALS AREN'T ***USEFUL...*** I BROUGHT YOU ALONG TODAY TO TEACH YOU A LESSON.

WAIT, YOU DID WHAT?

ARE YOU ***KIDDING*** ME, CECILIA? YOU JUST BROUGHT HIM HERE TO SEE ME FAIL? OF ALL THE FUCKED UP--

HEY.

SO, WHAT DO I NEED TO DO NEXT?

OH, WOW.

BUCK! GET THOSE BIG STEAKS OUT. WE'RE GOING TO HAVE OURSELVES A PARTY.

YOU LIKE STEAKS, RIGHT?

YEAH.

OH, HONEY. YOU DID SO GOOD.

YOU SMELL WEIRD.

I'M JUST HAPPY. I'M JUST SO HAPPY.

HEY JESSIE, LET'S GO HAVE SOME COFFEE, ALRIGHT?

WELL DONE.

TELL THE OTHERS I'M CALLING THE HOUSE. LETTING THEM KNOW THAT ERICA WILL BE STAYING WITH US FOR THE LONG HAUL, SO THE SCARLET MASKS CAN PREPARE HER ROOM.

YES, CECILIA.

THEY ALL THOUGHT YOU COULDN'T DO IT. BUT I KNEW YOU COULD.

THANKS?

SO WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO GET YOUR TATTOO?

SOMETHING is KILLING the CHILDREN

YOU'RE BEING VERY BRAVE. MOST OF THE OTHER KIDS CRY.

IT'S LIKE... SCRATCHING A RASH.

YEAH. THAT'S WHAT I THINK, TOO. NOT TOO BAD. HARDEST PART IS LEAVING IT ALONE FOR A FEW DAYS WHEN IT'S DONE.

YOU GIVE EVERYONE THEIR TATTOOS?

ABSOLUTELY. IT'S ONE OF MY FAVORITE JOBS. I JUST WISH I COULD GET A LITTLE CREATIVE WITH IT EVERY NOW AND THEN.

YEAH?

MAYBE I'LL MAKE THIS A ***BIG, BEAUTIFUL COW,*** AND I'LL PUT THE MARK OF THE ORDER ON YOUR FOREHEAD.

NO.

SEE? NOBODY LETS ME HAVE ANY FUN.

SO...YOU JUST PASSED YOUR INITIATION.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOU GET THE ***MARK OF ST. GEORGE*** ON YOU.

THAT MEANS YOU'RE OFFICIALLY ONE OF US. WE'LL DO THE CEREMONY AFTER DINNER.

THAT MEANS YOU'RE A MEMBER OF THE ***ORDER OF ST. GEORGE.*** FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, YOU'LL TAKE THE NAME OF OUR HOUSE.

YOU'LL BE ***ERICA SLAUGHTER.***

COOL.

A FEW YEARS DOWN THE ROAD, WHEN YOU'RE TRAINED, YOU'LL HAVE TO PROVE YOU CAN KILL A MONSTER WITH THE SKILLS YOU'VE LEARNED.

"THEN YOU'LL GET A NEW MASK WITH ***TEETH*** ON IT, SHOWING THAT YOU ARE A FULL-FLEDGED MEMBER OF OUR ORDER. THAT'S WHEN YOU'LL START WORKING IN THE FIELD."

AND A FEW YEARS AFTER THAT, WHEN YOU'RE ALMOST DONE BEING A TEENAGER, THERE'S A FINAL TEST...

"AND WHEN YOU PASS THAT TEST, WE'LL PERFORM THE ***RITE OF TREPANATION*** ON YOU SO YOU'LL BE ABLE TO KEEP SEEING MONSTERS WHEN YOU BECOME AN ADULT."

AND THEN I'LL BE A HUNTER LIKE JESSICA?

"PRETTY MUCH, YEAH."

YOU ARE GOING TO BE TRAINING TO BE ONE OF THE BLACK MASKS. DID JESSICA EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MASKS?

NO.

OKAY, SO... IN THE HOUSE OF SLAUGHTER, YOUR MASK COLOR SAYS WHAT KIND OF SKILLS YOU KNOW.

THE ***COLOR SETS*** ARE THE SAME IN EVERY HOUSE IN THE ORDER OF ST. GEORGE, ALL AROUND THE WORLD, EVEN IF THE MASKS LOOK A LITTLE DIFFERENT.

"BACK IN CHICAGO, YOU'LL SEE A LOT OF ***SCARLET MASKS.*** THE RED ONES. THEY ARE THE ONES WHO KEEP TRACK OF ALL OF US.

"SOME OF THE KIDS CALL THEM THE SERVANTS, BECAUSE THEY DO TEND TO THE HOUSE, AND WILL CHANGE YOUR SHEETS AND SERVE YOU MEALS...

"BUT THEIR REAL FUNCTION IS TO BE THE BOOKKEEPERS OF THE ORDER, AND TRACK THE LIVES OF ALL OF THE HUNTERS, AND MAKE THINGS EASY ON US.

"ME AND BUCK ARE ***AZURE MASKS.*** AZURE MEANS BLUE. IN ANCIENT TIMES WE WERE THE BLACKSMITHS OF THE ORDER.

"WE BUILT ALL THE MONSTER-HUNTING WEAPONS, AND WE HANDLE ALL THE TESTS OF SKILL TO MAKE SURE THE HUNTERS IN THE ORDER ARE SAFE.

"THESE DAYS, THAT MEANS A LOT OF COMPUTER STUFF. THAT'S MY SPECIALTY.

"I CAN MAKE NEWS STORIES GO AWAY, AND HELP KEEP THE BIG SECRET.

"NOW, THERE ARE FOUR KINDS OF HUNTERS. THE ONES WHO GO OUT AND HUNT MONSTERS IN THE WILD.

"YOU'RE GOING TO BE A ***BLACK MASK***...WHICH IS, TO BE BLUNT, THE MOST THANKLESS JOB WE'VE GOT... YOU'RE THE SWISS ARMY KNIFE OF THE ORDER.

YOU'RE SENT TO HUNT ALONE, AND TRAINED TO TAKE DOWN MONSTERS BY YOURSELF.

"THE ***WHITE MASKS*** ARE PACK HUNTERS. THEY TRAIN TO WORK AS A UNIT TO BRING DOWN THEIR TARGETS. THEY HUNT SOME OF THE BIGGEST MONSTERS THAT POP UP IN THE WILD AROUND THE COUNTRY.

"I'M GOING TO TELL YOU A SECRET THAT I DON'T WANT YOU TO REPEAT...

"BUT THE WHITE MASKS ARE THE BIGGEST ASSHOLES IN THE ORDER. THEY TAKE DOWN BIG GAME, SO THEY THINK THEY'RE HOT SHIT, BUT IF ANY OF THEM FOUND THEMSELVES ALONE WITH SOMETHING HALF-WAY DANGEROUS THEY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO COPE.

"THE ***SILVER MASKS*** ARE WHAT WE CALL 'THE SPECIALISTS.' THEY ARE TRAINED TO HUNT THE KINDS OF MONSTERS WITH MORE ESTABLISHED RULES. USED TO BE MORE COMMON, WHEN MORE PEOPLE BELIEVED IN THINGS LIKE VAMPIRES AND WEREWOLVES.

"WE'VE ONLY GOT TWO OF THEM IN THE HOUSE OF SLAUGHTER, BUT THERE ARE MORE IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD WHERE FOLKLORE IS A BIT MORE INGRAINED IN THE CULTURE.

"AND THEN THERE ARE THE ***EMERALD MASKS.*** THE MOST DANGEROUS HUNTERS IN THE ORDER.

"THEY HUNT DRAGONS."

DRAGONS ARE REAL?

SOMETIMES. BUT NOT USUALLY IN AMERICA. I THINK THERE ARE A FEW EMERALD MASKS BACK IN THE OLD COUNTRY, AND A FEW IN ASIA...

I WANT TO SEE A DRAGON.

YOU AND ME BOTH, KID.

WELL, YOU'RE ABOUT TO GET YOUR WISH, IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING.

HE MADE THE DRIVE OUT?

YES. HE INSISTED.

I'LL HAVE BUCK GET HIS ROOM READY.

GOOD.

HERE. REAL QUICK. FOR THE WALL.

COME WITH ME.

GO ON, THEN.

DO YOU LIKE GUMMY WORMS?
SURE.
HERE.
THANK YOU.
WILL YOU INTRODUCE ME TO YOUR FAMILIAR?
MY WHAT?
YOUR STUFFED ANIMAL.
OH.
YEAH. HERE HE IS.
WHAT'S HIS NAME?
IT *WAS* OCTO. I DON'T KNOW HIS NAME ANYMORE.
A POWERFUL BEAST TAMED BY A LITTLE GIRL.
YOU MUST BE FURIOUS.
SHE'S BESTED ME ONCE... BUT NEVER AGAIN...
I'LL PICK MY TEETH WITH HER BONES IN THE END.
THAT'S THE SPIRIT.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED IN THAT BARN, ERICA?

I PASSED YOUR TEST.

BUT DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY?

YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED THIS WEEK.

EITHER IN THE HOUSE WHEN THE MONSTER KILLED YOUR PARENTS AND YOUR FRIEND, OR IN THE BARN THIS AFTERNOON.

YEAH.

IT'S QUITE REMARKABLE THAT YOU DIDN'T.

OKAY.

YOU HAVE A SHARP EDGE TO YOU, DON'T YOU?

TLAC

HOW DO YOU MEAN?

HM.

I'D WAGER YOUR PARENTS DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH YOU. I'D WAGER THEY GOT ANGRY WITH YOU OFTEN. THAT YOU GOT IN TROUBLE.

IT WASN'T LIKE THAT.

I BET THEY STAYED UP LATE AT NIGHT TALKING ABOUT HOW THEY DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO COPE WITH YOU, AND I BET YOU HEARD THEM TALKING.

NO.

WHY ELSE WOULD YOU HAVE PASSED THE TEST?

JESSICA... JESSICA SAID I WAS PERCEPTIVE.

IT WAS TRYING TO GET ME TO TELL PEOPLE MONSTERS EXISTED, AND I KNEW THAT YOU PEOPLE DON'T WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THAT.

AND IT WAS LYING TO ME. SAYING I MIGHT BE ABLE TO SAVE MY MOM AND DAD...

BUT I KNEW I COULDN'T. THAT WAS JUST A TRICK.

THEY WERE *ALREADY DEAD.* I FIGURED OUT IT WAS A TRICK AND I GOT OUT.

NO.

YOU PASSED THE TEST BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU *ARE,* GIRL.

A TRAIT WE HAVE ELABORATE SYSTEMS TO TRY AND FIND OUT IN THE POPULATION TO KEEP OUR HOUSE STRONG.

STUCK

BUT OUR SYSTEMS ARE OFTEN TOO CLINICAL, OUR RECRUITS TOO COLD.

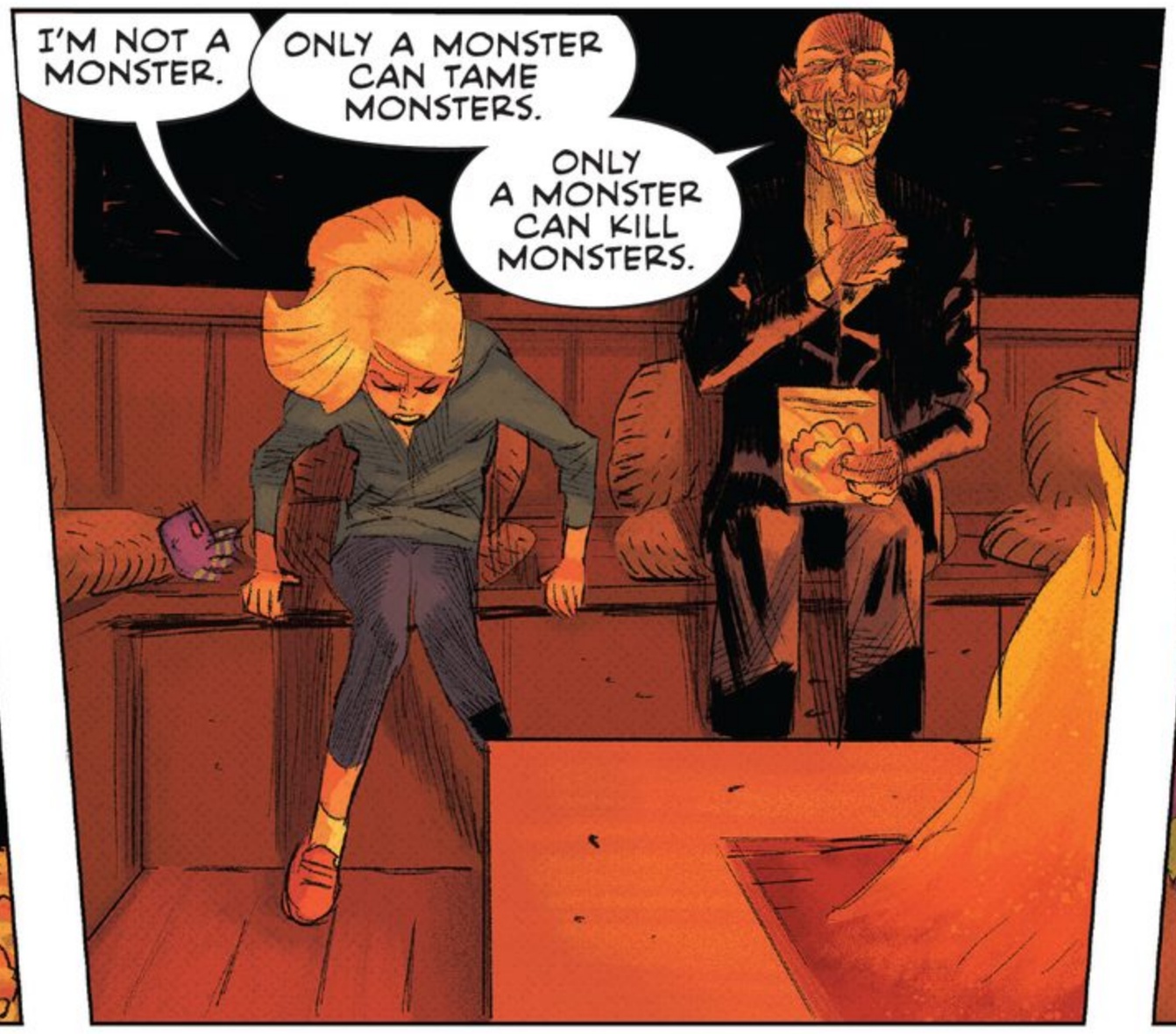
OUR HOUSE HASN'T HAD SOMEONE LIKE YOU IN A VERY, VERY LONG TIME.

IF YOU HAD ENOUGH EMPATHY IN YOU, YOU WOULD HAVE DONE ANYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO SAVE THEM. THE PEOPLE YOU LOVE.

GETTING LOST IN THE FANTASY WOULD HAVE GIVEN THE CREATURE THE TIME IT NEEDED TO FEED ON YOU. HOLLOW YOU OUT.

WHAT YOU DO MEAN?

YOU ARE A MONSTER.


I'M NOT A MONSTER.
ONLY A MONSTER CAN TAME MONSTERS.
ONLY A MONSTER CAN KILL MONSTERS.

AND TO TAME A POWERFUL CREATURE AS YOU HAVE...
THAT SPEAKS TO YOUR POWER, TOO.

I'M A GIRL...

NO. NOT ANYMORE.
NEVER AGAIN.

I HAVE VERY HIGH HOPES FOR YOU, ERICA SLAUGHTER.
DON'T DISAPPOINT ME.

ERICA... ARE YOU OKAY?

I DON'T KNOW.

YEAH.

I DON'T LIKE THE DRAGON.

HE'S A BIT MUCH, BUT HE MEANS WELL.

ARE YOU SURE?

COME ON, ERICA. IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO JOIN THE FAMILY. TO BECOME ONE OF US.

I DON'T WANT TO BE LIKE HIM. I WANT TO BE LIKE ***YOU.***

ARE YOU KIDDING ME? I WANT TO BE LIKE ***YOU,*** KIDDO. YOU'RE SO MUCH COOLER THAN I AM.

I DON'T KNOW.

I THOUGHT YOU WERE PERCEPTIVE.

YEAH. ME TOO.

WHAT'S WRONG?

DO YOU THINK I'M A BAD PERSON? IS THAT WHY I'M HERE?

NO. I DON'T. I THINK YOU'RE GOING TO BE THE BEST OF US YET.

NOW, LET'S GET A MOVE ON. WE'VE GOT A CEREMONY AND STEAKS WAITING FOR US.

OKAY?

YEAH.

OKAY.

SOMETHING is KILLING the CHILDREN™

"ME AND MY MONSTER"

PART FIVE

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN...

HOUSE OF SLAUGHTER™

TYNION · BROMBAL · DELL'EDERA · SHEHAN · MUERTO

HRR HRR

CLI-KLAK KLAK

SHHH...

I WON'T HURT YOU.

I KNOW YOU'RE *SCARED* AND *HURT* AND *PISSED* AS ALL HELL...

BUT--

KLACK

YOU'RE NOT A MONSTER.

AARON SLAUGHTER'S HUNT LOG

I know I'm one of the few who still properly fill these out--

(I'm sure Erica's all arrive shorthand on bar napkins or butt-dialed phone calls.)

--but the Order needs its assurances...and I have my part to play.

The Hunt started slow. Three days, barely a nibble.

I began to wonder if I'd lost my touch...

...then remembered I never had one to begin with.

But, yes, I understand why it had to be me.

Of that, I still have no doubt.

Because, if there is anything the House of Slaughter taught me, it's that...

There will always be monsters.

So there must always be those who hunt.

FIFTEEN YEARS EARLIER

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!

THIS IS WHY YOU DON'T GO ON *HUNTS,* AARON.

YOU NEVER MOVE YOUR *SCRAWNY LEGS* FAST ENOUGH--

RUN!

"*OH,* YOU'RE A *GREAT HUNTER,* AARON."

"*OH,* YOU'LL BE *FINE,* AARON."

BULLSHIT, JESSICA.

"...SAVE IT FOR MY *EULOGY.*"

RUSTLE

WHA--!

WH--OOOOAA--

--OHH MY GOD, I'M GOING TO DIE.

OW.

SHIT.

RUSTLE RUSTLE

MAYBE YOU CAN PULL THIS OFF?

YOU'VE SURVIVED WORSE, RIGHT?

...*RIGHT?*

JUST GET INTO POSITION, *BREATHE,* AND DON'T--

RUSTLE

FUCK.

HUH?

THWACK

P-PLEASE DON'T KILL ME, I'M--

ON SALE
OCTOBER 2021

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"